

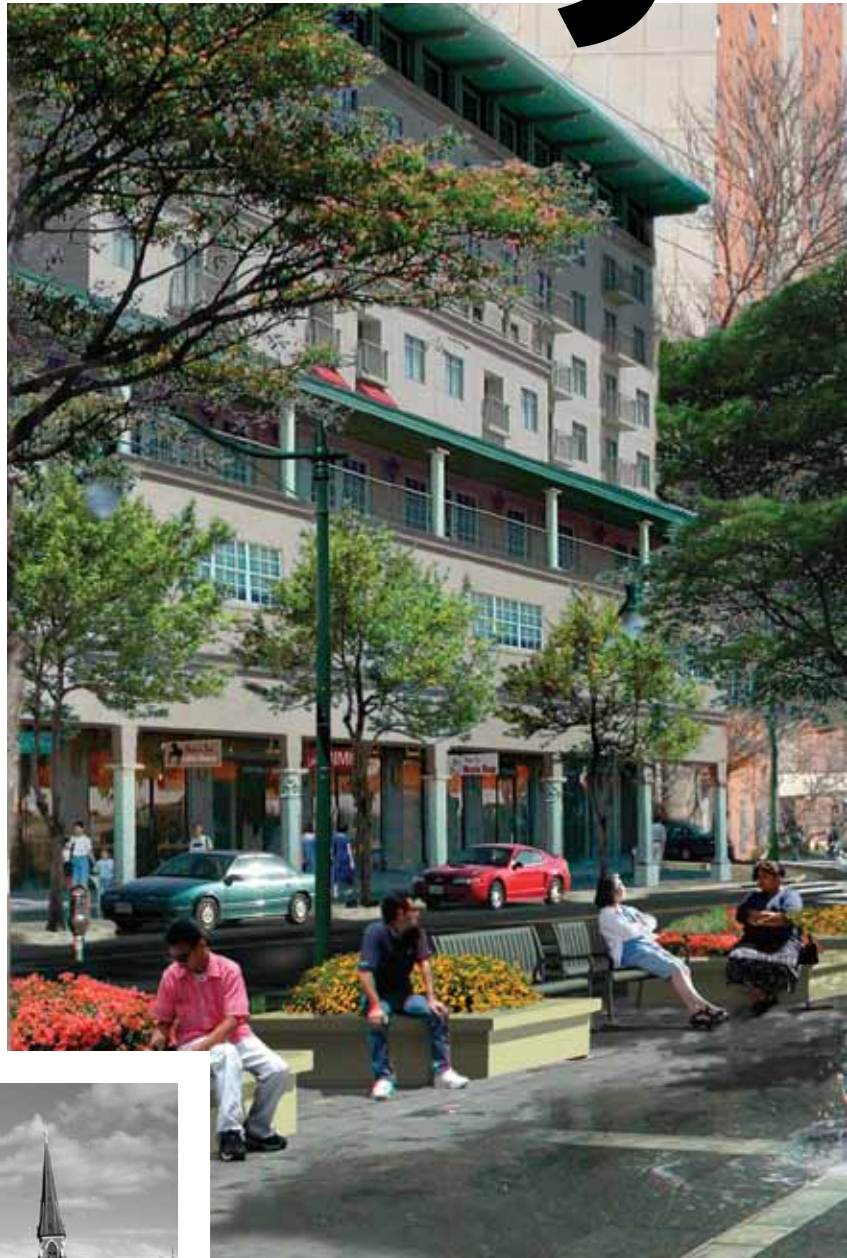
# Sim City

BY PATRICK VENNE

As any longtime Portlander can attest, before Portland was *positively funky*, it was *positively funky*. But over the past few decades the city has achieved a miraculous turnaround, largely through adaptive re-use of formerly vacant or dilapidated structures. Portland's unique sense of place enabled and continues to fuel this remarkable transformation.

According to Yarmouth architect Mitchell Rasor, 'place' suggests the vibrancy of "buildings that define the street as an outdoor room, furnished with generous sidewalks, windows into shops and cafes, trees, and benches." So, what might New Urbanism look like in Portland?

Approaching downtown from the north, one enters the beautified Woodfords Corner at the confluence of Deering and Forest Avenues, where a handsome brick building of three or more stories replaces the surface parking lot which used to sit in front of Dunkin' Donuts. A differentiated façade allows sunlight to dance back and forth across the structure. The new building extends south along Deering Avenue toward Big Sky Bread Company, completing an urbanized block and creating a new destination. Dunkin' Donuts continues to occupy the first floor of the building, which is now busier-than-ever, thanks to increased foot traffic. The sidewalks in front of the older, more urban Oddfellows Building and neighboring structures anchoring the Corner are widened to provide space for attractive sidewalk furniture for al-fresco dining, both of which allow people to see and be seen. Forest Avenue itself is narrowed. (While this won't decrease traffic on its own, research shows that if you widen streets, you're 100 percent guaranteed to *increase* traffic. The goal is to make it a complete street—one which caters to shoppers, visitors, residents, workers, and bikes as well as cars and buses.) A line of evenly spaced shade trees



By re-arranging the raw elements of growth, desolate seas of asphalt become inviting, public spaces. A re-imagined Top of the Old Port pulsates with activity. Benches, flower beds, and fountains allow visitors to relax and give children a place to play. Shady trees cater to peoples' bibliophilia. This design reinforces the continuity of an otherwise unbroken plan in the design of the street, while mixed-use buildings frame the scene and provide a constant flow of foot traffic.

You say you want an evolution? As future Portland cityscapes spring to life, so will the design of our New England city morph into “outdoor rooms” that will allow us to see and be seen.



FROM LEFT: MICHAEL SMISEK; ROBERT WITKOWSKI; ILLUSTRATION/URBANADVANTAGE

## BACK TO THE FUTURE



To enliven Forest Avenue, a multi-way boulevard incorporates urbanist principles. Central travel lanes accommodate faster traffic and are flanked by one-way, tree-lined access-ways for local businesses. Medians punctuate the otherwise constant onslaught of traffic and provide refuge for public transit riders. With wide sidewalks hugged by local shops and restaurants on either side of the street, Forest Avenue facilitates travel by all modes. It becomes a destination rather than merely a route.

creates a comforting canopy over the public way.

A similar design extends the length of the street, toward downtown, where landowners have taken advantage of former parking lots by pulling new structures closer to the street; first-floor uses are pedestrian-oriented to allow groceries and other household necessities to be purchased on foot; and college students live in the same structure they dine at, rent movies from, or work in. Forest Avenue Plaza has been replaced with a well-lit and inviting urban space, which houses new uses in addition to those dating to its time as a strip mall. Restaurants, coffee shops, and even a few neighborhood pubs akin to the Great Lost Bear and Whaddapita! line portions of the street. With their broad, inviting windows, these

structures create a seamless transition between the public, semi-public, and private realms.

On the other side of town, Westgate Plaza has become a mixed-use urban neighborhood. While parking is just as easily obtained as it was when the automobile reined supreme, it has been relegated to a position of secondary importance; all cars now park behind new and denser development, away from the public eye. Street lamps guide pedestrians through public infrastructure including wide sidewalks, walking trails and a pedestrian-only way leading to a mix of local and national retail shops, above which elderly residents live side by side with students in law, medicine, pharmacy, or any number of other graduate programs within walking distance





FROM TOP: ROBERT WITKOWSKI ILLUSTRATION/URBAN ADVANTAGE; MICHAEL SMISEK

of improved transit nodes along Congress Street and Stevens Avenue. The increased density allows more frequent bus service, and there is talk of a streetcar. As a result, the fewer cars driving by the “Village at Westgate” realize they are in a place people care about, and slow down as they pass or, more frequently, pull in.

The length of Congress Street to the Libbytown neighborhood has filled in with new structures similar to those along the recently revitalized Forest Avenue, until meeting the up-and-coming St. John Street. St. John Street from Park Avenue near Hadlock Field to Margarita’s has developed



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# BACK TO THE FUTURE



Building on its strong urban history and convenient location, Woodfords Corner becomes the center of a bustling neighborhood. Covered sidewalk cafés allow al-fresco dining rain or shine, and a nearby theater generates constant foot-traffic after dark. The broadened sidewalk accommodates increased pedestrian travel demands.

North Deering are increasingly experiencing pressure from developers interested in creating similar urban settings in those contexts.

While it's true this vision appears extravagant, it doesn't need to remain that way. Portland's built environment and the problems facing it may be far too complex to be susceptible to a cure-all, but a properly drafted form-based code may be the next best thing. "New Urbanism" doesn't suggest a simple answer to sprawl or disjointed land uses; nor is it meant to imply a desire for sterile or pre-canned architecture, or to limit opportunities for contemporary design. Rather, it reflects a desire to ensure the elements of new growth are arranged in a civically responsible manner by requiring a minimum base of context-sensitive urban appropriateness.

To Portlanders, in fact, there is nothing "new" about this concept at all. The task

*(Continued on page 74)*



into a thriving neighborhood of commerce and culture. In response to the rising number of businesses which left the suburbs to reinvest in Portland, McDonald's redeveloped its parking lot—again!—and now occupies a smaller space in a new, multi-story mixed-use building which anchors the neighborhood. St. John Place signifies a transition from the inner-ring suburbs to an urban core. Union Station Plaza has again been demolished, with the site restored to

its former glory. A stately building occupies the site and now hugs the sidewalk; like the Village at Westgate, parking is placed behind the structure. In this way, pedestrians are drawn south toward western Commercial Street, where the renewed interest in urban development initially began to creep outward from the Old Port. The city's various urban villages have all begun to connect with each other and, ultimately, to its central core. Deering Center, Rosemont Corner, and

**St. John St. residents enjoy local commerce, community, and social interaction—all on foot—while visitors are afforded convenient on-street parking in addition to rear lots. Metered parking creates a protective buffer between people and cars, encouraging inviting window-shopping. An arcade of trees calm traffic along the sidewalk, focusing attention on the storefronts it frames.**



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BACK TO THE FUTURE



When complete, Federated Companies' plans for the West Bay-side project will house a variety of uses, from structured public parking, to retail, office, and over 500 units of housing. Its

*Sim City* (continued from page 50)

at hand, then, is grappling with how to ensure this continues to be true. As centrifugal market forces continue to drain activity from the city, it is worth questioning how the city might curb this trend and re-establish a place-based gravitational pull. A carefully crafted form-based code, by prescribing the positive aspects of urbanism rather than merely proscribing the

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Concentrating development near preexisting infrastructure and services enhances livability. Along Spring Street, residents walk to their daily needs while electric streetcars allow workers to hold impromptu meetings outside of the office. Parked cars are hidden by a new row of shops that allow comfortable window shopping. The urban fabric that represents Portland's central business and shopping districts is reconnected.



form will be urban in nature, unlike so much of the development Bayside has seen since its district plan. The company has game-changing plans for the Portland peninsula.

negative ones, may hold the key to allowing Portland to build, quite literally, upon its strengths, continuing its surge toward realizing its future as one of the most livable cities in America. ■

▶ Patrick Venne is a Portland zoning attorney with a master's degree in community planning which emphasized land use and design. Have a vision for a new Portland? Send us your thoughts by visiting [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/about/contact-us](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/about/contact-us).

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